



FEMINISM AND RELIGION

Exploring the F-word in religion at the intersection of scholarship, activism, and community.

Lilith: Evil Demon or Feminist Role Model?



Today, we celebrate Simchat Torah (the Joy of the Torah) which marks the end of a cycle of Torah readings and the beginning of a new one. Therefore, the Torah portion for October 14, 2023 is Bereshit (Genesis 1:1–6:8), the first parshah of the Torah. This parshah is most known for its myths surrounding the beginning of the world, including, within it, two creation stories, the first one running from 1:1 to 2:3 and the second from 2:4 to 2:25. These accounts of creation are followed by a story about Adam, Eve, a snake, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The parshah concludes with the happenings of Cain and Abel, the

descendants of Adam and Eve, and Noah, a man who found divine favor.

I [wrote](#) briefly about this parshah in the midst of the pandemic. The writing there mirrors the chaotic and often difficult nature of that time. Thus, I want to revisit the parshah now. Interestingly, I am drawn to comment on the same topic: Lilith.

As a feminist and a Jew, I have been struggling with what to make of Lilith. She is, within Jewish circles, portrayed as a demon who causes various problems for pregnant women, newborn babies, and sleeping men. Seeking more information, I recently picked up a copy of Rapael Patai's book *The Hebrew Goddess*.^{*} Patai traces the history of Lilith from the first mention of her in Sumeria around 2400 BCE, where one of her demon offsprings is the father of Gilgamesh. In Babylonia, she seems to be a goddess of the night taming wild beasts.

In the Talmud, she has the appearance of a cherubim, who is Adam's first wife, the one who insisted on equality with Adam. When Adam would not see her as an equal, she spoke the deity's name, flew off to the Red Sea rumored to be the place of demons, and became one. Patai argues, through archaeological remains, that Jews were on the whole very scared of her and often sought protection from her. This general fear has continued to modern times within some Jewish sects. In fact, Patai concludes his section on Lilith with the following "A citizen of Sumer ca. 2500BCE and an East European Hasidic Jew in 1880 CE... would have readily recognized each other's beliefs about the pernicious machinations of Lilith and each other's apotropaic measures for driving her away or escaping her enticements," (251). I find this persistence of her demonization intriguing and also very patriarchal.



"Lilit" by David Černý, another example of Lilith not without controversy and yet [perhaps feminist](#). Photo by author.

Yet, I often struggle to see what could be redeeming about her history. Ok, one can and should [critique](#) the demonization of a woman (Lilith) who only wanted to be equal to a man (Adam). Yet, she is also highly sexualized, having sex with unwilling men while they sleep, using their sperm to spawn more demons. Legends

surrounding her pit her against the “good” Jewish woman causing them to be infertile, miscarry, or die in childbirth. Lilith also kills newborns.** What can we say about these things other than that they are patriarchal?



Author's photo of "Lilit" from below.

Judith Plaskow's "The Coming of Lilith" rewrites Lilith's story to correct one of these patriarchal issues: her pitting of women against each other. In Plaskow's midrash Lilith and Eve become friends and rely on each other for learning and one day rebuilding. Yet, Plaskow doesn't really wrestle with Lilith's long patriarchal history of demonization; in many ways, I find that she tells a completely different story of Lilith. Thus, I went searching for other feminist voices. I found one.

In 1976, Aviva Cantor Zuckoff wrote a piece in *Lilith Magazine* entitled, "[The Lilith Question](#)." In the article, Zuckoff does what I was looking for; she historicizes Lilith and questions what

Jewish women should take away from the historical demonization of Lilith. In fact, she writes, "Had Adam accepted her equality, these negative traits would be absent; in fact, there would be no war between the sexes at all, a war based on men's unwillingness to accept women's equality." Zuckoff rightly asks: are we blaming the wrong person here? Is it not rather Adam who caused the issues between the sexes with his inability to accept the equality of men and women? And, yet, it is Lilith who becomes the demon?

Throughout the piece, Zuckoff grapples with this long history of demonization, concluding that Lilith is a role model for Jewish women for three reasons. First, she has intimate knowledge of the divine; she utters the divine name. She embodies a drive for equality between the sexes. Finally, she refuses to be an enabler for men.

After surveying this history, Zuckoff states irrefutably that Lilith embodies Jewish men's fears about women. She also contains within her the Babylonian exile concern of the loss of the Jewish people as a whole. Finally, Zuckoff wonders if Lilith may be patriarchy's attempt to rid the world once and for all of matriarchy.

Zuckoff summarizes the power of Lilith beautifully. It is not her evil reign of destruction as patriarchy would have us think. Rather, Lilith's power is in her fight for justice and the way in which she embodies equality between women and men. Zuckoff's article was just what I was looking for, and, after reading her article, I can conclude that Lilith is a (Jewish) feminist role model after all.

NOTES:

*This information comes from pages 221-254 of Raphael Patai's book [The Hebrew Goddess](#).

**Another good source on traditional (patriarchal) perspectives on Lilith is Geoffrey W. Dennis' [The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic and Mysticism](#).

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